INFORMATION

Quarantine Station

Sydney Harbour National Park

NSW
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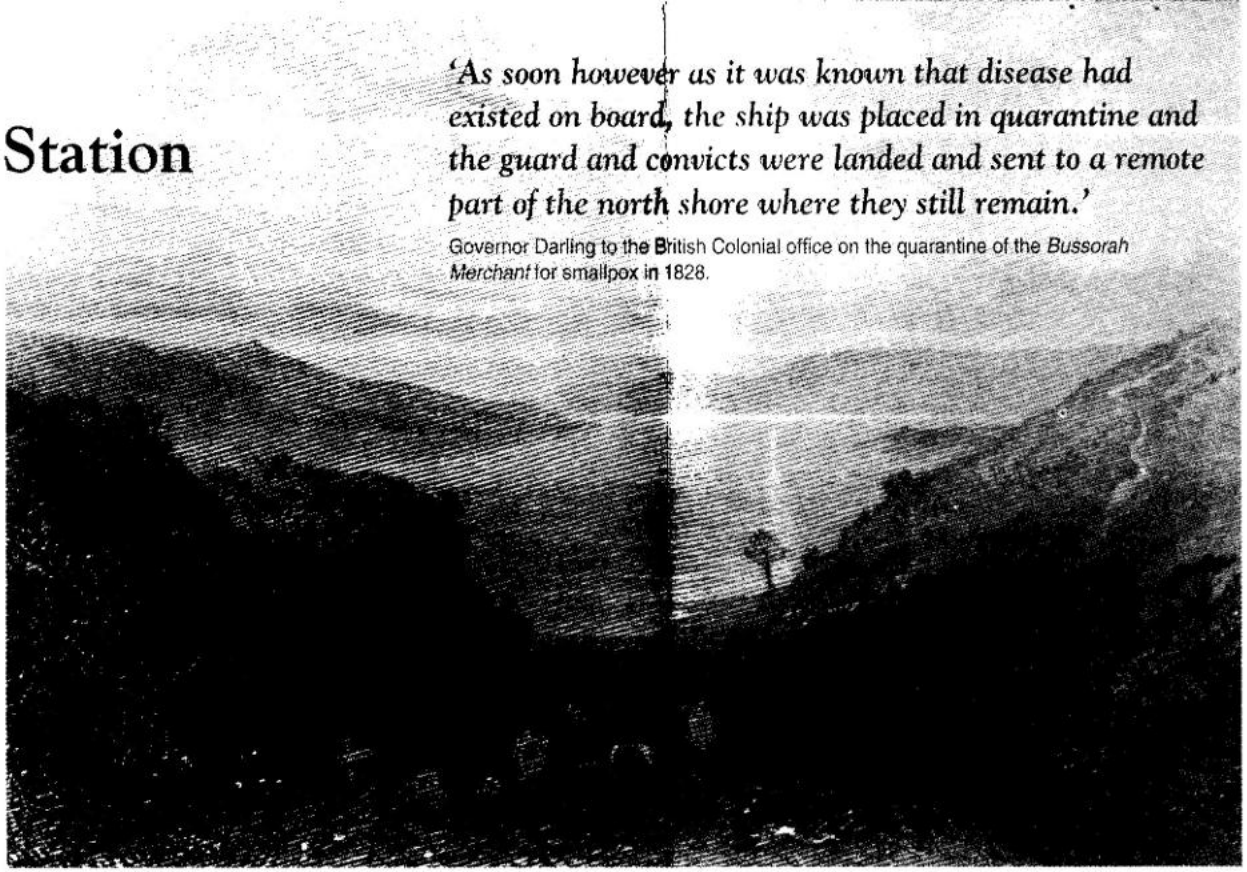
SERVICE

North Head Quarantine Station

'As soon however as it was known that disease had existed on board, the ship was placed in quarantine and the guard and convicts were landed and sent to a remote part of the north shore where they still remain.'

Governor Darling to the British Colonial office on the quarantine of the *Bussorah Merchant* for smallpox in 1828.



The Quarantine Station burial ground as it appeared in the mid 19th century. An etching after an original drawing by Skinner Prout.

A small section of North Head known as Spring Cove was, for over 100 years, Sydney's main defence against a range of terrible diseases including measles, scarlet fever, influenza and smallpox. From 1828 until 1984, Spring Cove was used as a quarantine area – keeping infectious disease sufferers in and the healthy public out. It is now included in Sydney Harbour National Park as a historic place, following its closure as a quarantine area.

Aboriginal occupation

It is believed that the Aboriginal people lived around the Sydney basin for at least 20,000 years and that this population was gradually increasing over the 3000 years prior to the arrival of Europeans. By 1788, Spring Cove was occupied by people of the Kameragal Clan who spoke the Guringai language.

Aboriginal sites on North Head include shell middens, axe grinding grooves, rock engravings and occupation sites. These indicate that the Aboriginal people gathered rock oysters, mussels, cockles and other smaller shellfish, as well as catching fish and wallabies.

Governor Phillip met the Kameragal Clan at Spring Cove in January 1788. The initial "cautious friendship" of their meetings gave way to encounters "neither frequent nor cordial". The breakdown of the traditional aboriginal lifestyle was rapid thereafter. Having little resistance to imported diseases, the Aboriginal population of the Sydney region was soon decimated by chicken pox or smallpox. They lost their land and food sources to European agriculture and European attempts to establish Aboriginal settlements failed miserably.

Quarantine

Spring Cove was first used for quarantine in 1828. In that year the *Bussorah Merchant* arrived in Sydney with smallpox on board. The free passengers were encamped at Neutral Bay while the convicts and their guards camped on the beaches at Spring Cove. Each person was vaccinated, made to wash, and given clean clothes. Their bedding and woollen clothes were then burned in order to destroy the 'miasma' – a gas thought to spread diseases.

Spring Cove was chosen as the quarantine ground because of its isolation from Sydney. It provided a sheltered mooring for ships detained there as well as fresh water from a spring on Store Beach.

In 1832 a cholera epidemic reached Britain, having spread from Afghanistan across the Middle East, Russia and Europe. This outbreak prompted Bourke's government to pass a quarantine act so that it could legally enforce quarantine in order to stop cholera spreading to the colony. The area above Spring Cove was declared a quarantine area in 1832.

Despite its legal status, the Quarantine Station maintained a rough camp atmosphere throughout the 1830s. Quarantined passengers were called upon to clear bush, pitch their own tents and even erect permanent buildings.

The inadequacies were highlighted by the arrival of the *Lady McNaughton* in 1837. Fifty-four people had died of typhus on the voyage to Sydney. A further 13 died in quarantine. The ship's doctor wrote to Bourke about the "scenes of misery, wretchedness and disease which, everywhere presented, were truly appalling". The passengers were in quarantine for 11 weeks. In 1840, the station's doctor described the hospital as being "in a cruelly crowded state", with each bed being used for four children.

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'... scenes of misery, wretchedness and disease which everywhere presented were truly appalling ...'

Ship's doctor of the *Lady McNaughton* to Governor Bourke, 1837

What's in a name?

Infectious diseases are transmitted by an **agent** (for example cholera is transmitted by water). **Contagious diseases** spread directly from person to person by close contact. Collectively they are **communicable diseases**. An **endemic** disease is localised; an **epidemic** occurs when it spreads rapidly over a large area or several countries. If it covers the world it's a **pandemic**. Similarly, animal diseases are described as **enzootic**, **epizootic** and **panzootic**.

Contagion versus Miasma

For centuries, those who believed that infectious diseases resulted from natural causes (rather than divine wrath) tended to divide into contagionists and miasmatists.

Contagionists held that epidemics resulted from some poison, originally generated in humans which spread by contact from person to person. Miasmatists believed that epidemics resulted from a gas-like atmospheric poison. The 'miasma' was often believed to be generated by such things as sewage, rotting flesh or vegetation, or the bilge-water of ships.

Early English quarantine laws, still in force when the North Head Quarantine Station opened, were based on the belief that miasmas could be transported for long distances in cargo and the holds of ships.

Of course the contagionists were correct, but until the 19th century, scientific technique was too poorly developed for the dispute to be settled. Although it ultimately proved to be incorrect, the miasma theory made a big contribution to the conquest of infectious diseases because its followers were strongly motivated towards ending the appalling sanitary and housing conditions they believed gave rise to miasmas.

Cholera

In 1817, after a particularly severe monsoon, cholera spread outside India for the first time. The disease was first thought to be caused by eating rice spoiled by damp. Six cholera epidemics which spread worldwide followed.

The European epidemic of 1830-32 played a big part in the decision to set up North Head as a permanent Quarantine Station. The fact that cholera was transmitted by water was discovered during an outbreak in London in 1854.

Bubonic plague

No other communicable disease has generated such terror or challenged the medical profession more. In a bubonic plague pandemic, the disease often appears in three forms. It begins as 'uncomplicated' plague which is spread to humans from infected rats by rat fleas. This is fatal in up to 90 per cent of cases but is one of the least infectious of the communicable diseases. 'Pneumonic plague' spreads quickly from person to person by attacking the lungs and recovery is virtually unknown. 'Septicaemic plague' attacks the bloodstream and can be transmitted by human fleas. It kills in hours and recovery is virtually unknown.

There have been three major pandemics. The first, beginning around 540 AD hastened the final collapse of the Roman Empire. The second, the 'Black Death', began in China in 1345, reached Italy in 1347 and wiped out as much as a third of the population of Europe by 1349.

The last pandemic began in China in 1892, prompting an international scientific effort during which the role of the rat flea in the spread of the disease was discovered by PL Simond. The plague reached Sydney in 1900 and the Quarantine Station was used to isolate victims. It was during the Sydney outbreaks that research undertaken by Ashburton Thompson and Dr JHL Clumpton at the Queens Magazine on Goat Island (now in Sydney Harbour National Park) authoritatively confirmed PL Simonds discovery.

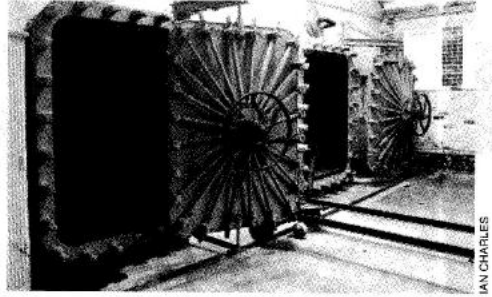
Smallpox

An acute infectious disease with a high deathrate, smallpox is believed to have been wiped out in 1977 (although, controversially, a small sample is held under tight security for medical research). Smallpox can be transmitted by breath, saliva or infected articles. In the 17th and 18th centuries, epidemics occurred about every 10 years. In the 18th century it was the single major cause of death in Britain. It was probably the first disease to be popularly recognised as being contagious. Do-it-yourself innoculation using dried smallpox scabs was a very widespread procedure in eastern countries for centuries before being introduced to Europe in the early 18th century. After 1798 Edward Jenner popularised a safer technique using cow-pox. The Quarantine Station was used in several smallpox incidents.

In the First Class area, sometime in the late 1920s. The quarantined passengers on the left are playing quoits.
Courtesy Mrs I. Brierley.

Leaving quarantine: passengers embarking on the ferry Kookaburra in the late 1920s

Tombstones erected in memory of the deceased passengers and the captain of the William Rodger which arrived in quarantine in September 1838. Six adults and 10 children died during the passage followed by 24 adults and five children during quarantine.



The station's giant autoclaves were used to disinfect passengers' luggage and ships' stores.

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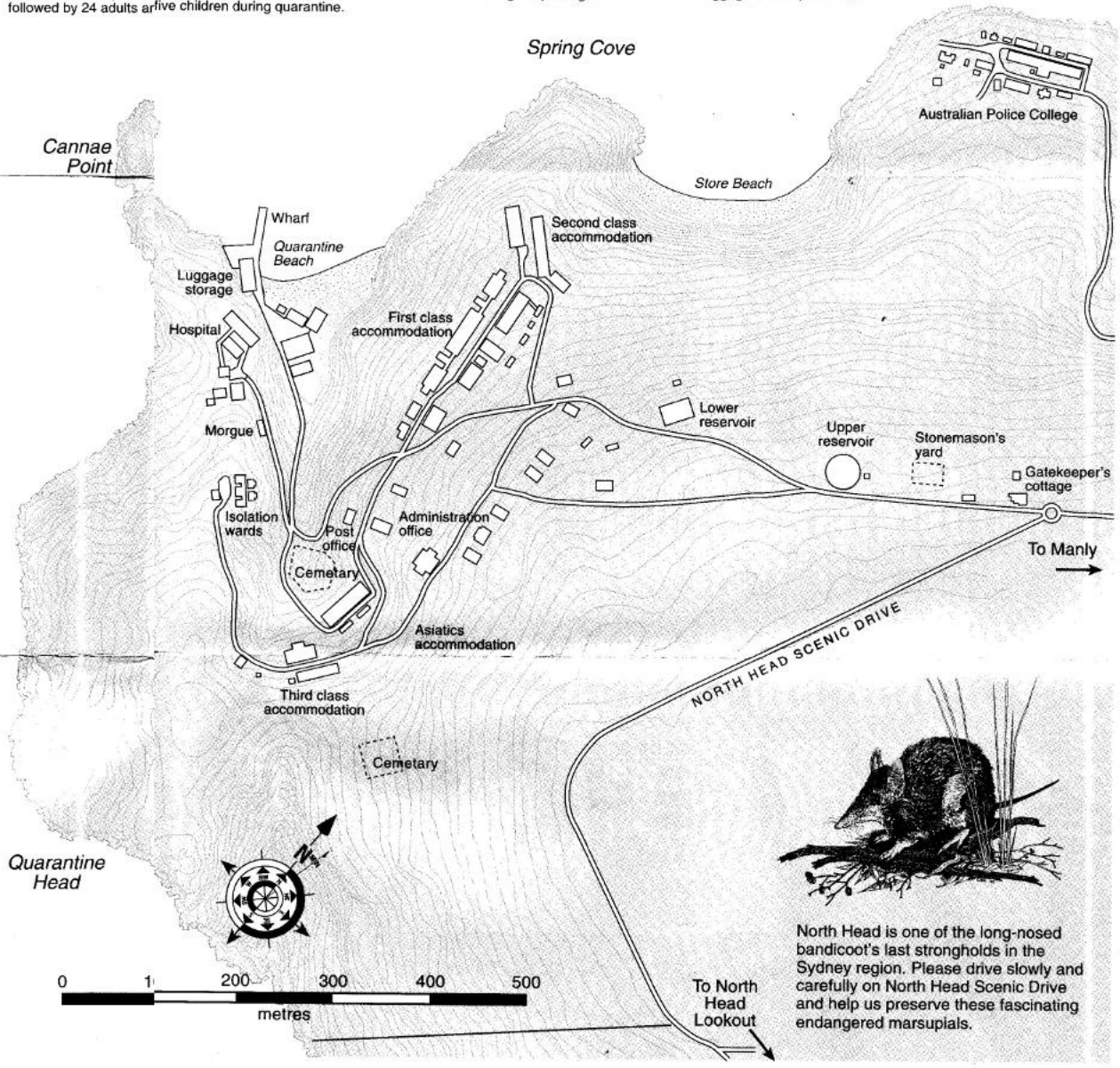
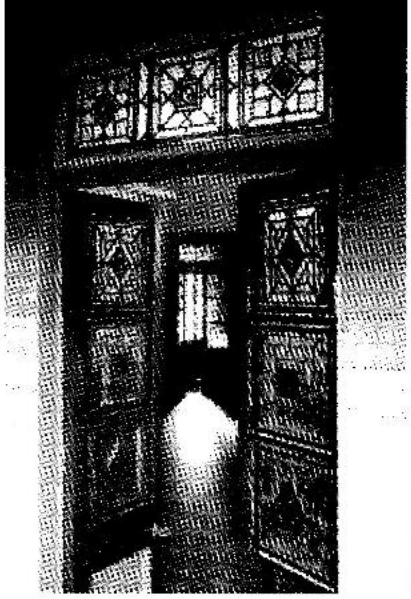


North Head is one of the long-nosed bandicoot's last strongholds in the Sydney region. Please drive slowly and carefully on North Head Scenic Drive and help us preserve these fascinating endangered marsupials.



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The leadlight doors to the First Class dining room. Accommodation standards at the station reflected typical standards aboard ship.

The atmosphere was bleak. Captain Stokes of the 'Beagle' wrote that he was able to identify the station by the "number of tombstones whitening the hill". One of the survivors of the quarantine of the *John Barry* in 1837, wrote, "I was seized with fever and at one time the doctors had given up all hopes of my recovery. My coffin was made and two masons began to work on a tombstone for me".

Conditions improved, however, as more permanent buildings were erected and the quarantine procedure became more efficient. By 1870, the station was divided into dock, hospital, stores, administration, and healthy accommodation areas. The latter was further divided into first, second and third class areas, reflecting the classes of accommodation aboard ship.

Most of the buildings now on the site were built in one of two bursts of construction activity. The first was in the 1880s, following a royal commission into conditions at the station during a smallpox outbreak. The second, from 1912–16 occurred after the Federal Government took control of state quarantine in 1909. This was fortunate because the station was then well-equipped to cope with the 'Spanish influenza' epidemic which swept the world after the First World War.

The station declined in importance thereafter. The upgrading of quarantine facilities on Thursday Island; the widespread use of immunization and the increasing popularity of air travel reduced the flow of people through the station. Its main concerns then became the fumigation of ships and inspection for rats. The last ship quarantined at North Head was the *Sakaki Maru* in 1973 with suspected smallpox.

The station was used as emergency accommodation evacuees from Darwin after Cyclone Tracy, and for Vietnamese orphans in the 1970s.

In 1984 the station was transferred from the Commonwealth to the State Government and it was handed over to the National Parks and Wildlife Service for inclusion in Sydney Harbour National Park.

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Cover photo: First class accommodation buildings seen from the verandah of second class quarters.
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